



## **Media Communications Policy**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The mission of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) is to provide high quality services to residents, businesses and consumers in the District of Columbia. DCRA ensures the health, safety, and economic welfare of constituents through licensing, inspection, compliance, and enforcement programs. For this reason, the people of the District of Columbia have an interest in the operations of the DCRA and the thousands of matters it handles each year. Because the public media is an effective and important way to keep the public informed, it is essential to communicate information to the media in a timely and accurate manner.

The overarching objective of this policy is to provide the public with timely, accurate, clear, objective and complete information about the DCRA's policies, programs, services, initiatives, and events in which the agency is involved in its regulatory capacity and to ensure that the information to be provided may be disclosed under any applicable law.

The DCRA Communications Policy provides principles and procedures that should guide all employees' official interaction with the outside media. Journalists and other media representatives play an important role in the democratic process-providing the public with news and information about government, and reporting on the public's views and opinions of government.

Successful and effective implementation of this policy requires close cooperation and coordination among DCRA employees and the Chief of Staff and the agency Public Information Officer (PIO).

At DCRA, the Chief of Staff and, as delegated, the agency PIO are responsible for:

- Cultivating proactive relations with the media to promote public awareness and understanding of agency policies, programs, services and initiatives;
- Operating and responding effectively in a 24-hour media environment. The agency must be able, on short notice, to reach and inform the media on issues of importance to decision makers and the public;
- Facilitating information or interview requests from the media, and managing plans and strategies for communicating with the media;
- Consulting the Mayor's Office of Communications when planning media campaigns or strategies that could involve Mayoral participation, or when preparing a response to a media inquiry that could have implications for the Mayor or other agencies under the authority of the Mayor;

- Ensuring the quality and consistency of information provided to the media. Media enquiries, whether by phone, email, letter or in person, must be addressed promptly to accommodate publication deadlines;
- Ensuring processes and procedures are in place to assist managers and employees in responding to media calls. Communication specialists responsible for media relations ensure that media requests, particularly for interviews or technical information on specialized subjects, are directed to knowledgeable managers or staff designated to speak as official representatives of the agency.

Inasmuch as the Chief of Staff and the PIO are ultimately responsible for all internal and external communications for DCRA, including contact with the news media, all questions about this policy or its application in particular circumstances should be directed to the Chief of Staff or PIO.

## **SCOPE**

This Policy applies to all DCRA employees, including all contract employees and interns. This policy applies to communications with the media made by DCRA employees in their official capacities as representatives of DCRA. This policy is not intended to restrict employees' rights to express their views on matters of public concern within the limits of applicable law. See *Hall v. Font*, 856 F.2d 255 (D.C. Cir. 1988); D.C. Official Code § 1-615-51 et seq. (2001).

## **POLICY**

### **I. Before the Media Calls**

A. All employees must be sensitive to cases that are of potential media interest. Such matters, and matters of particular interest to the Mayor, must be brought to the attention of the PIO as early as possible. Whenever feasible, staff should inform the PIO about significant events before they occur so members of the media can be informed and have the option of covering the event in person, rather than relying on a DCRA press release after the fact.

B. Once brought to the attention of the PIO, an employee may be asked to draft a news release or provide the PIO written information about the significance of a matter and the relevant details that merit press attention. When providing this information, the primary question that should be answered is: "Why is this matter important to those who work and/or live in the District of Columbia?" While the PIO is ultimately responsible for news releases and advisories, all employees involved in providing information to the PIO are required to make certain that all information contained in the news release or advisory is accurate and properly placed in the public domain, and that its dissemination is in accordance with the law.

C. The Chief of Staff or PIO may request that employees responsible for the matter speak to the media concerning specifics of the matter under appropriate circumstances. At his or

her discretion, the PIO may be present during any conversation between an employee and a representative of the news media to discuss official business of the agency.

## **II. When the Media Calls**

A. To coordinate the DCRA's response to media inquiries and to ensure accuracy and consistency, all employees shall inform the PIO when they receive a request for an official comment or for an official statement concerning DCRA policies or activities from a journalist, media outlet or broadcast production unit. In such situations, all employees should refer the person making the inquiry to the PIO at (202) 442-4513, or obtain the relevant contact information and respectfully advise the individual that someone will promptly get back to him or her with the appropriate information. In the latter instance, it is imperative to report the inquiry immediately to ensure a timely response. The PIO, in consultation with the Chief of Staff and senior staff, will then determine the appropriate response and who should provide the response.

B. The Director, in consultation with the Chief of Staff and/or PIO will designate from time to time other agency managers to speak in an official capacity on issues or subjects for which they have responsibility and expertise.

C. Officials designated to speak on behalf of DCRA or any of its sub-Divisions, including technical or subject-matter experts, must receive instruction, particularly in media relations, to carry out their responsibilities effectively and to ensure the requirements of the agency and this policy are met.

D. Spokespersons at all times must respect privacy rights, security needs, and matters before the courts. When speaking on a particular issue as the official representative of the agency, they must identify themselves by name and position, speak on the record for public attribution, and confine their remarks to matters of fact concerning the policies, programs, services or initiatives of the agency.

E. When an employee has been authorized to speak on behalf of DCRA, they speak in an "official capacity" and must conform their remarks accordingly. It is best to assume at all times that any comment made to the press is "on the record" and may appear in a media report. The expression of opinions or personal views which go beyond the facts or the publicly-articulated position of DCRA is inappropriate and inconsistent with the limitations outlined above for official communications.

F. Any discussion with the media must be limited to publicly available information, and must not disclose details of an investigation, confidential information, or other privileged information.

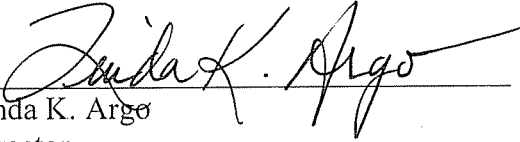
G. When authorized to speak with the media regarding official DCRA business, employees should avoid, if possible, responding to questions that implicate policy decisions unless specifically authorized to do so. When in doubt as to how to answer any question, or whether a particular question should be answered, refer the questioner back to the PIO.

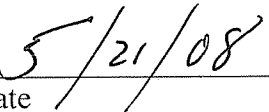
H. All DCRA employees and contract employees speaking officially as agency representatives are subject to this policy on media inquiries. Unless the employee is intimately knowledgeable about the internal and external factors influencing the DCRA's position on an issue, his or her comments can be inaccurate and possibly harmful to the agency. An employee who makes official comments to the press about the agency on behalf of DCRA without getting prior approval is acting as an unauthorized representative of DCRA and is subject to appropriate disciplinary action.

#### EFFECTIVE DATE

This Policy shall become effective ten (10) days after this notice is formally issued by the Director of DCRA to its employees.

This Administrative Memorandum supersedes all previous administrative memoranda, orders and policies to the degree there is any inconsistency between those items of direction and this Administrative Memorandum.

  
Linda K. Argo  
Director

  
Date